

ond-class citizens in their own culture. Elizabeth is the wife of a priest. A preacher's wife who is barren. Her barrenness would have left her filled with shame and remorse. In fact, she makes the comment that God has removed her disgrace when she becomes pregnant. Up until this unexpected event she was doomed to be one that people shook their heads about and treated with quiet looks and pity. "Poor Elizabeth," you can almost hear them whisper.

There is also Mary, the younger cousin whose story is more outrageous than Elizabeth's. She was engaged to be married to Joseph, but now she had been visited by an angel and she was pregnant not by Joseph but by the Holy Spirit. Who would believe this? Not Joseph at first, and who can blame him? He had decided to put Mary away quietly and go on with his life until the angel appears to him as well. Mary, a young pregnant teenager, unwed, goes from her home and village to Elizabeth's house. It is there that as they first meet, the truth about both of their children becomes a joyous promise.

As Elizabeth greets Mary the child within her jumps for joy. Elizabeth, full of the Holy Spirit, speaks a word of promise over Mary. Mary, hearing Elizabeth's encouragement, responds with joy as well. These two women who were at one moment full of shame and disgrace are now filled with joy as they wait with expectation for what God is going to do. They are iconoclasts.

I like how Leonard Sweet describes the Incarnation. Sweet writes:

In T.S. Elliot's masterful phrase "The Incarnation is the intersection of the timeless with time." The intersection story goes like this: a pregnant teenager; a confounded fiancé; a tedious journey; a troubled birth in unfriendly surroundings; a mysterious star; a quiet, hidden, lonely adulthood; an eye popping, heaven opening debut; a hometown rejection; gossip, betrayals, and desertions; culminating in a tragic death.²

God was an iconoclast in the first Christmas story. God was doing something no one expected. God was coming to break all of our preconceived notions of how God worked and what could be expected from God. Jesus is God's iconoclastic moment. In a way that we could not have imagined, God came to us. It is as John Doane wrote "Twas much that man was made like God before, But, that God should be made like man much more."³

Let's look at the two iconoclasts in our text today and see what they teach us about thinking differently this Christmas. First there is Elizabeth. We might say about

Elizabeth that she does not see things as they are but as what they can be. What she sees before her is a young pregnant teenager that is her relative and has come to her for guidance and help. Yet, filled with the Holy Spirit she sees what God is doing. She does not ignore the obvious and live in denial of the situation, but through the help of the guidance of the Holy Spirit, she is able to see what God is doing beyond the obvious.

This Christmas is a time for us to not only face the present with a dose of reality but to see beyond the present to the future and the possibilities of God. Instead of a pregnant teenager, Elizabeth saw the mother of her Lord. What situation in our lives needs the ability to see the possibilities of God?

Maybe it is our work. Some of us have been out of work for some time and others for a short time. Some are wondering where and when a job will come their way. Others are still gathering their thoughts after losing work. We cannot live in denial of the situation. There are changes that have to be made and adjustments in spending and priorities. Yet, with God's peace and strength there might be a new way of looking at life. It might be a time for remaking yourself. It might be a time to re-tool and pursue a passion or interest. It is definitely a time to rethink priorities of time and resources.

Some of us need iconoclastic thinking for the future in regards to our relationships. We have lost loved ones, friends have moved away, routines have been altered and even traditions this year will be different. We must not deny our feelings of longing for things to be as they were, but at the same time, we must explore the possibilities of God. We must discover new friends, new family, new community and new routines and traditions. They can be a gift of God for our future.

We all need the ability to look beyond the obvious with faith in the future. Remember the definition of faith. Faith is things hoped for yet unseen. Elizabeth reminds us of the ability to look to the possibilities of God.

Mary teaches us even more. Mary's iconoclastic response reminds us of God's love and also our invitation to God's purpose in the kingdom. Mary's first response is that she is favored. She exclaims that God has been mindful of her humble state. Mary receives her calling from God with great passion and rejoices that she has found favor with God. The word for humble can mean simple, lowly or overlooked. The one who would be overlooked has found favor with God.

That is good news to us this Christmas season. In a world where we might feel left out, overlooked and un-

der appreciated, we have found favor with God. God looks upon our lowly state; yet, he loves us and cares for us. God really loves you, and his affection has nothing to do with your education, your achievements, your job security, your bank account or your marital status. In fact, the surprising insight of Mary's song is that God "has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant" (v. 48). She announces that God favors us in our lowliness, in our humility, in our simple willingness to lean on him.

That's good news for all of us, especially in a year of economic turmoil, layoffs, investment losses and personal instability. When the world around us doesn't seem to care, God favors us. When the future seems uncertain, God promises to do great things for us. Mary announces that God's "mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation" and that he will never let his people down.


That's image breaking, expectation shattering, and radically reassuring. And it also happens to be true.

Yet, that is not all. Mary also declares to us that we have been invited to participate with what God is doing through Jesus. Mary's words "are a declaration," writes Scot McKnight in *Christianity Today*, a declaration "from a voice at the bottom of society. It is a voice crying from the depths that God's Messiah was finally bringing justice for the poor." It is a voice proclaiming a new order — an order centered on Mary's son, the One who was coming to save his people from their sins.

The description of Mary's words is what William Barclay calls revolutionary. In Mary's words, Barclay claims, are three important revolutions that Jesus would bring. First, Jesus would bring a moral revolution. What Barclay means is that Jesus would change lives. People would be different and changed because they followed Jesus. Mary sings that Jesus would scatter those whose inmost thoughts are proud.

Have you ever noticed that all of our best Christmas stories are about a revolutionary moral change? Even the stories that are not necessarily "Christian." There is the Christmas Carol where Ebenezer Scrooge is transformed from his money-loving, Christmas-hating self to a person of giving and good cheer. There is the movie *It's a Wonderful Life* where George Bailey gets

a glimpse of life without his existence, and although faced with a dire reality, rediscovers what really matters in life. Even in *The Grinch Who Stole Christmas* the Grinch is depicted as one whose heart grows and is transformed. Christmas is about the possibility of our hearts changing and our lives being transformed. Bruce Goettsche writes in his sermon "The Wonderful Counselor:"



***"We all need
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St. Augustine was a womanizing man who ran with the wild crowd before becoming one of the church's greatest leaders. John Newton was a drunken slave trader before he wrote "Amazing Grace." Johnny Cash was a hard-living country singer before coming to Christ. Chuck Colson was a convicted Watergate conspirator before he met Christ. The Lord led him to begin Prison Fellowship, and Colson has become one of the prophetic voices of our time. Alice Cooper was a wild, drug-crazed rock singer before coming to Christ, where he sits under the teaching of R.C. Sproul and others. George W. Bush was known for his drinking and partying before he met Christ.⁴

So, Jesus brings a moral revolution and we are invited to participate.

Secondly, Jesus brings a social revolution. Mary exclaims that Jesus will cast down the mighty and exalt the humble. In Jesus, the value of every person is exalted. We are reminded that everyone is created in the image of God and that Jesus died for all people everywhere. Christmas is the reminder that there is no favored nation status with God. All people of every nation, language and tribe are included in God's favor and love.

Leonard Sweet writes:

Unlike other religions Jesus transcends culture. In the same art gallery you can find Jesus dressed in the clothing of the Middle Ages, the twentieth century, African garb, Asian garb and another Jesus surrounded by aboriginal people. Contrast Muhammad's birthday with Jesus. Muhammad who was just a man has a birthday that is celebrated without any pictorial representation. Christianity produces manger scenes from every culture, time and space. Only in Christianity do you have a founder who is one of us in time and in place yet separate from us in the ability to transcend time and place. The changing face of Jesus in every culture is the elo-

quent testimony of the Truth that has more than one face, the Jesus of many faces.⁵

One of the most famous Christian works of art is found in Colmer. It was commissioned by the Antonian Fathers. It is an altar piece created by Matthias Grunewald. In this altar piece Jesus has a body that is oozing with sores and wounds. When the nurses who worked in the adjoining hospice viewed the depiction they saw the people they worked with everyday. People who were dying of the Black Death. When the sick and the dying looked at that picture of Jesus, they could see themselves in him. Jesus had incarnated himself among them and they knew that God was in them and with them.

This is a social revolution that Jesus can be embraced by all people. The mighty and the humble are valued by Jesus. We too must value all people. Jesus tells us that when we see others we see him. When we care for others we care for him. These are Jesus' words to remind us of the social revolution that his kingdom will bring.

Thirdly, Barclay also mentions an economic revolution. Mary exclaims that the hungry will be filled but the rich sent away empty. This is an economic revolution. Now, these kinds of words make some of us very nervous. Is Mary speaking of a kingdom that consists of some type of spiritual Robin Hood? Are we to think that in God's kingdom the economic revolution is socialism? This is our attempt to label something which is much more significant with our own feeble understanding. Whenever the Bible speaks of the rich, the connotation of haughtiness, pride, hoarding, selfishness and the worship of money and things accompany it. Most of the time the rich of Scripture are those who worship money instead of God and they are also people who oppress others. The concept here is not an eco-

conomic revolution that is political as much as it is personal. The kingdom of Jesus would reintroduce the true purpose of the gifts and blessings of God's creation. This revolution is the change of spirit giving and the purpose of our possessions.

Jesus reminds us that all we have belongs to God and that what we have is for God's glory and not our own. What we have has been given to us so that we might be a blessing to others. Our wealth is not to oppress others but to bless others. Christmas is a time to remember the true value of things and to rethink how we use what we possess.

Christmas traditions are good. We need family, Christmas Carols, dinner at Grandma's, time with friends and Christmas Eve Services. These kinds of activities enrich our lives, but this Christmas, let's lift our heads above the wrapping-paper Christmas day and remember that now Jesus has come, things must change. We must see beyond the obvious to the possibilities of God. We must remember that no matter what, we are favored by God that is God loves us. We must change in this new kingdom of God. We need a change of heart. We need to change the way we view others. We need to change the way we view our possessions that we might have a giving spirit. We need an Iconoclastic Christmas. ❀

¹This sermon was inspired by the sermon "A Iconoclastic Christmas" from *Homiletics Magazine*, November-December 2009.

²Leonard Sweet, *So Beautiful* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook Publishing, 2009) 162.

³John Doane, "Holy Sonnets, XV", *The Poems of John Doane*, ed. E.K. Chambers (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1986)1:166.A

⁴Bruce Goettsche, "The Wonderful Counselor", *Union Church Sermon*, December 2, 2001.

⁵Sweet, 168.

